

Book Review

Being Realistic About Reasons

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***Being Realistic About Reasons.* T.M. Scanlon. Oxford:
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This is an extremely impressive book, and in my view, impressive in a way that is rather unusual in philosophy these days. The arguments are not only consistently subtle, they are, as far as is possible when doing ambitious contemporary philosophy, consistently transparent. There is no sneering at one's opponent, no uncritical reliance on a fashionable phrase or slogan, no resistance to acknowledging where the arguments may seem vulnerable to contrary intuitions, or simply, as all arguments must, run out of justificatory power on their own. It is remarkably good, and remarkably honest. Scanlon seeks to defend what he calls "realism about reasons" in a series of lectures that both sketch out his

own position and, equally importantly, seek to show why the typical objections to realism about reasons are in fact not so very well founded after all. In his resistance at every turn to the picture of reasons defended by the non-cognitivist or expressivist, Scanlon is committed to giving us an exceptionally ambitious argument. For such resistance entails then offering a picture quite different from the one the expressivist relies on with respect to a wealth of connected matters: what there is in the world (the “ontology” of reasons if you will), how we can know of such things, or have confidence in our conclusions, if reasons are to be thought of as real, but not as natural facts, and how the beliefs we reach in these domains can, simply as beliefs, nevertheless be motivationally efficacious. There is a great deal of provocative, original argument on all of these subjects, and anyone interested in these matters will find much in this book to think about, and, I am sure, learn from. This is not to say there are no significant difficulties in Scanlon’s argument. There are, and they will occupy us shortly. But it is overall an exceptionally substantive addition to the present debate on normativity, which is currently dominated by a conception that takes commitment to naturalism to entail understanding reasons essentially as non-cognitive states, as non-cognitive desires. Scanlon understands the demands of naturalism as well as any, but argues convincingly that the explanatory power of reasons cannot be understood, or perhaps better, cannot be preserved, should we see reasons themselves as natural facts.

In one way, this is, as I have said, an exceptionally ambitious work, arguing against the current orthodoxy for a conception that sees reasons as “real” and as a result, for all the other things that must also be the case if this claim is to be defended. But in another sense, under Scanlon’s view, we wind up in a place that is disarmingly modest,

disarmingly familiar. Reasons may be real, and may obtain in virtue of considerations that exist quite apart from our saying so, but the world that results is the messy one we know all too well already, where how reasons are to be assessed, or compared with one another, is very elusive, perhaps in many cases irreducibly personal. Scanlon consistently argues that his view, while undeniably philosophically controversial, is in fact far closer to common practice, and common sense, than that of his rivals. And he may be more right than he realizes, particularly with respect to where, on his account, we end up, with respect to what we can say about the *worth*, or weight of some reason or other we appeal to, in justifying some act or other. To think of reasons as he does, as real, which is to say, as irreducible, is not to hold that we always, or even frequently, have a kind of determinate conception of their relative or comparative *status*. There is a deep, to me, very suggestive, tension in Scanlon's view, between a certain *kind* of objectivism and an ambivalent sense of the limits of that objectivism. And this tension, the ways in which the "objectivism" Scanlon defends is quite modest, quite limited, is, as I say, very close indeed to how real life seems to me. Scanlon defends no general principle of reason-assessment, no grand theory of that in virtue of which a reason can be called a good one. Indeed, he is overtly, and to my mind, rightly, skeptical of any such possibility. The idea that we could have a good, plausible, metric of reason assessment, appropriate before all cases (how Kant would have understood the categorical imperative test for example) is rejected. For Scanlon, there can only be particular, local conclusions about particular considerations, particular arguments we happen to find convincing when we think about them in the right way. And on the other side of the spectrum, there will be arguments of uncertain justificatory authority, and *this* fact, the uncertain status, will never be otherwise, however much

we might try to have it so. Many will find this feature of the argument frustrating and I well understand such feelings. But we must ask ourselves whether the frustrations here reflect a defect in the argument, or a feature of the world that such arguments seek faithfully to describe. If we are to traffic in considerations that genuinely explain action, genuinely explain the nature of advice we give to others or the nature of self-justification, we must countenance irreducible talk of reasons; we must think of reasons as real and not think of reason talk as a proxy for some other natural thing. But how these reasons stack up against more or less personal expressions of normative assessment, the degree to which they truly do justify an action—here, philosophy may have little to offer of a systematic sort, except an accurate description of a very unsystematic state of affairs. The *currency* in which we assess our world normatively must be understood irreducibly, autonomously if you will. But the *assessments themselves*, the claims we make about our reasons, their weight or authority—these claims I think will vary enormously, and run from the impossible to challenge to the deeply idiosyncratic.

This last remark is not Scanlon's language; it is mine. And he might well chafe at the degree of agent centered relativism it appears to countenance. I expect he would certainly chafe at the suggestion that we wind up with a position, within his very own framework, that is essentially identical to that of the expressivist on one important matter—the *authority* of reasons—before a very important category of action for which we offer reasons. But I believe this is so all the same, and I will argue for that conclusion below. Connected to this claim is another, more elusive one: philosophical generalizations about “the normative” or about reasons as such can reach only so far. A unified treatment of the normative will fail to capture, will blur over, important differences in the nature of justification that

holds across different kinds of cases. The expressivist, Scanlon argues, to me convincingly, has very much the wrong the view about what a reason *is*. But the expressivist may be well right, over an important range of cases, about the sort thing an appeal to reason amounts to. Realism about reasons is one thing. The degree to which such realism about reasons gives us objectivity in our normative judgments is very much another.

Let me begin with the argument that is surely the most central of all, the explanation of intentional action by reference to reasons, and why such explanations require we construe reasons “realistically.”

INTENTIONAL EXPLANATION AND THE (IRREDUCIBLE) REALITY OF REASONS

Reasons are complex creatures. When we offer, or point to, a reason, we do not simply *explain* our action (should we have acted on that reason), we offer a *justification* for it too. It is this distinctive feature of justification that cannot be preserved should we abandon talk of reasons, or seek to translate talk of reasons into talk of desires and their satisfaction. And since justification talk is ineliminable—it is inseparably bound up with making sense of intentional action; our world would not make sense without it—autonomous talk of reasons will be ineliminable too. Of course, that (very briefly) is so far simply Scanlon’s view. It is not yet an argument for its truth.

Consider the following. Someone is driving a fast moving automobile and he will injure and possibly kill a pedestrian if he does not turn the wheel. It seems obvious, Scanlon argues, that the fact that he will injure or kill the pedestrian is a *reason* to turn the wheel. The normative character of this reason begins to come into focus if we contrast it with

a mere explanation, an “explanatory reason.” We can say the reason the driver turned the wheel is because he wanted to avoid hitting the pedestrian. That explains his action, if indeed it is true. But the normative reason, the reason *to* turn the wheel, that is clearly present whether the driver turns the wheel or not. And so obviously, it cannot be identical with any desire the driver has, fails to have, or might have had. In a way, the normative character of reasons, the justificatory nature of our appeal to reasons, and the way such justification stories cannot be understood as appeals to some desire or other comes out more vividly when we take up a case where the reason is offered in the face of hostility. Consider a case where in a borrowed car I turn the wheel to avoid killing a cat, and as a result, damage the fender. I then justify myself to the unhappy owner by offering this fact as a reason, a justification story for why I turned the wheel. But this claim *is* a justification, can be a justification, only if I am:

...calling that person’s attention to what I claim to be a fact, independent of both of us, about what one has reason to do...Whether the other person agrees with it or not, my claim that *p* was a reason for me to do *a* responds to his challenge, in a way that expressing my acceptance of a norm, or a plan, or an attitude of approval does not. (59-60)

I cannot simply be confessing what I wanted; *that* cannot (in a case like this) be a justification at all. Offering a reason has to be something else entirely—pointing to a fact, or consideration, that is said to justify an action in virtue of the sort of fact, and sort of act, it is. These inter-related notions—offering a reason, offering a justification, pointing to considerations that genuinely do meet, or purport to meet, rational criticism, or the demand for a justification—are in a significant sense “foundational.” By that I mean:

we cannot translate these notions into purely naturalistic ones and preserve their character, any more than we could translate logical operators like *modus ponens* into the empirical states coextensive with their use and in doing so preserve *their* character. Recalling the example above of the cat and the fender, the question is not, cannot be, “what did I want?” (or what did I approve of) but “what *should* I want, what am I *entitled* to want?” and so forth. Normativity is intrinsically... well, normative.

But why exactly must accepting this platitude mean that expressivist views must be wrong? After all, expressivists are not explicitly “eliminativists” about the normative; they think of themselves as offering a very plausible conception of normativity. They hardly deny the *practice* of giving reasons and offering justifications; they just deny that there are any properties corresponding to these activities.

Expressivist views were developed, Scanlon notes correctly “largely to explain the significance of normative judgments for the agent who makes them—to explain how such judgments “motivate” an agent.” (58) How well they in fact manage to do this will occupy us later on. Scanlon, with great originality, approaches this question via another, one rarely taken up in meta-ethics: what is the picture, when within expressivism, of giving *advice* to another? What is the picture on this account of interpersonal discourse? It is, in a word, hopeless.

According to Gibbard, to judge that *p* is a reason to do *a* in circumstances *c* is to plan to weigh the fact that *p* in favor of doing *a* in such circumstances. It would seem to follow that to advise someone that *p* is a reason to *a* in her circumstances is to express my acceptance of a plan to weigh the fact that *p* in favor of *a* in such conditions. This does not seem to

capture the normative grip that that advice is intended to have on someone who believes what the adviser says. Why should she care what I plan to do? We might try to close the gap by ascending to a higher level: my advice could consist in expressing my acceptance of a plan to adopt the plan of weighing the fact that p in favor of a in her circumstances. But the gap remains. Why should she care what plans I plan to adopt?

Taking my advice as “expressing approval” of weighing p in favor of a ... may sound more plausible. But this is because approval can mean so many different things. I can, for example, approve of someone’s weighing p in favor of a because I find this flattering, or because it will lead the person to do something that will benefit me. In order to capture the idea of [giving] advice, the idea of approval needs to be specified more exactly. “Expressing approval” appears to describe what is going on in giving advice if (I would say only if) we take it to be approval of the person’s attitude *on the ground that* what he or she takes to be a reason actually is one. (58-59)

The point is really not so very different from how we understand ordinary empirical belief. Unless we think of the belief as at least purporting to refer to something going on *outside* the head, what is going on *inside* cannot possibly be justified (this point has been with us since Descartes). The whole practice of giving or accepting advice does not survive philosophical self-consciousness, should we think the expressivist view correct. Much as Sartre’s conception of “choice” would make it so choice would in fact have no point, “advice”—giving it or taking it—under Gibbard’s theory (should we sincerely think it right) would be pointless, would disappear.

All right, the reader might say, when making sense of what is going on when justifying my actions to the angry car owner, or telling someone he really should think about his dying mother before going off to Thailand, this seems right. Surely this cannot just be a recitation of what I have approved of, without further reference to the idea of this “approval” being itself (allegedly) justified in virtue of some consideration or other. And no matter how many times we try, we just cannot capture justification by reference to some approval function that is thought of as unmoored in the world. Fair enough. But are there not cases where my desire alone gives me all the “reason” I need? Perhaps in these cases, the idea of “justification” shrinks too. What more “reason” do I need to drink pumpkin flavored beer than the fact that I desire to do so? What more reason *could* there be?

Indeed, indeed. Scanlon’s handling of such cases is both impressive and evasive; it is here I think that the difficulties in, or the limitations of, Scanlon’s view begin to appear. Scanlon’s treatment of desire-as-justification arises in the context of his considering the threshold challenge posed by Mark Schroeder’s reductive desire theory: that reasons just *are* desires (where that is understood as some natural fact, available to a science like psychology), and so a person’s having a reason just consists in some fact about that person’s desires and what will promote them. (6) Schroeder offers a persuasive argument for this view in his example of Ronnie, who likes to dance, and Bradley, who can’t stand it. Surely, Schroeder claims, (“plausibly,” Scanlon is nice enough to add) that the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie to go but not a reason for Bradley to go. (47) But Scanlon wants to distinguish the following. First, there is the question, what *explains the difference* between Ronnie and Bradley. Here, no doubt, what explains the difference will be some natural fact,

some neural or functional fact (if you will) true of one, not true of the other. Then there is the question, “why the fact that Ronnie enjoys dancing makes it the case that the fact that there will be dancing at the party gives him a reason to go.” And here the answer the Humean, or Schroeder, would give, “because Ronnie has a desire for experiences that he finds pleasant,” is not obviously the most satisfactory answer at all. Suppose Ronnie would enjoy dancing but does not know it, does not, on this assumption, *have* this desire; surely he would still have a reason to go all the same. Scanlon prefers to say *the fact that* Ronnie enjoys dancing (or would enjoy it) is what gives him a reason to go. (49-50)

What is the difference? By speaking of a fact, a consideration, apart from a desire, in this case, the fact that someone *enjoys* a certain thing, Scanlon puts this case, explanatorily, on a par with all the others. The fact that “Ronnie enjoys dancing” functions, in the justificatory story, *exactly like* the fact that “the cat would die had I not swerved” in the earlier car crash case. It is a fact, or consideration, independent of desire, that justifies the intentional act, justifies it by pointing to a *reason*. If the act is intentional, it has a reason, and a reason is a consideration we can, (we must) make sense of independent of the desire that may, or may not, be responsive to this consideration. It is rare of course in these sorts of cases—where my reason is the fact that I enjoy the act I go on to perform—that the reason and the desire might come apart (something that by contrast often happens when we have a reason to diet or to exercise say)—but neither is it impossible, or inconceivable. And, as a result, framing the reason story this way, even in these cases, is better able to handle the counterfactuals mentioned above too (where Ronnie has a reason to go even if he does not in fact know this, and so does not have a desire to go).

But the reader cannot help but notice an asymmetry too, and questions as to whether anything interesting follows from this asymmetry are unfortunately not really taken up. Let me explain. In the case where I swerve to avoid killing the cat, it is easy to speak of the reason apart from any desire. Indeed, the callous driver who does *not* swerve clearly, and undeniably, fails to respond to a reason we can make sense apart from his indifference—easily. But if the “fact” is “the fact that I enjoy X,” obviously, this fact can obtain before any X you like. In a way, this is good; this is what we want. So, that fact that I enjoy marijuana gives me a reason to smoke marijuana, the fact that I enjoy the Bach piano partitas gives me a reason to go put one on, the fact that I enjoy getting away with small acts of shoplifting gives me a reason to engage in small acts of shoplifting... and on and on we go. Scanlon may have distinguished “the fact of enjoyment” from “the desire” in terms of what occupies the relevant place holder in the framework of explanation by reference to a reason, but the *truth conditions* for the reason (in this case) are pretty much identical with the truth conditions for the desire, and *this* I submit is going to be quite distinctive to cases of this kind; it is exactly what is *not* the case in the example where I swerve to avoid the cat (and in other the standard examples so dear to Scanlon). And I don’t think we want to make *too* much of the possible counterfactual, “you would enjoy it if you tried it”—and as a result, go on to make the claim that even without a desire, you have a reason, where the reason is now the so called fact of enjoyment were you to act in ways to which you are presently disinclined. *That* remark is probably true for me right now with respect to all sorts of interesting substances, but it hardly follows that I really do have a reason right now to ingest any of them.

Does this difference, the difference in the role desire plays across these cases, matter? Yes, I think it does. I think it

certainly does in trying to understand the different uses to which appeal to a reason may be put. I want to suggest something Scanlon shies away from, the possibility of distinguishing between “strong” and “weak” ways in which appeal to a reason may do normative, or justifying, work.

When I say, “I drink whiskey because I enjoy it”, I am offering a “reason” in what I would call a weak sense. When I say, “I swerved to avoid hitting that pedestrian” I am offering a reason in what I would call a strong one. In the first case, I am really just naming the fact that explains my actions as an intentional act. I am not under hypnosis, I am not acting on a bet; fine. But in the second case, in addition, I claim that my acting on the consideration in question holds up under critical scrutiny, is, in short, a *good* reason. There is no way we can be saying this when simply saying “I do X because I enjoy it,” because obviously, we could (and do) enjoy anything, and if we say we are, in these cases, *also* offering a “good reason,” then the idea of a “good reason” can now have no truth conditions. Scanlon scoffs at the view of reasons that would see them as identical to desires when he asks, “Does a person really have a reason to do what will fulfill any desire he or she has, no matter how foolish?” and it is a nice alarmist point. (4) But surely he is in the same position—does a person have a reason to do that which enables him to enjoy whatever it is he (or she) enjoys, no matter how foolish? Well, yes, I think we can say so—but only in a very *weak* sense of reason, the sense that pretty much simply tracks the idea of minimal intentionality.

In this minimal sense of reason, Scanlon’s position I think is very reminiscent of Davidson’s in “Mental Events.” If an act is to be thought of as intentional, Davidson argues, then we must characterize it as having a mental cause. And if has a mental cause, then there is a certain story here that is

not the same sort of story as the story of law like causation that is coextensive with it. No law like causal story captures the sort of rationalizing—the kind of sense we make of an action—that reference to a *mental* cause does. If we were to replace “mental cause” with “reason,” and replace “law like causation” with “desire,” we move pretty seamlessly from Davidson to Scanlon. Reference to some natural state, some natural cause (in the context of this argument, some non-cognitive desire) will never give us the *justification* for an action that reference to a *reason* does. Of course, Davidson’s actual position speaks of the mental attribution as an artifact of “interpretation,” and this part of the argument, the non-factualism, is best set aside. (Viewing Davidson from within the lens of contemporary meta-ethics, one might say he makes a Mackie like mistake here, taking “the real” or “the factual” to be only what is identical to the domain of the natural sciences, and so he has no alternative but to call mental attributions “interpretations.”) If we instead spoke of mental attributions as simply “not empirical,” not identical to purely naturalistic attributions (or properties)—and no longer spoke of *any* attribution as “non-factual”—then I think the two positions get very close. When looking at intentional action, acts intentionally expressive of mental states, we must countenance a certain sort of non-empirical talk as fundamental, as not reducible to the empirical, if we are to preserve the kind of sense we already make of such actions. This is what it means for Scanlon to be “realistic” about reasons. But this identification of reason with the intentional on one hand, and with the idea of a full blown justification on the other also requires him to move back and forth between these two senses of “reason.” There is the “strong” sense (or use) of “reason” in which appeal to a reason *defends* the act against possible normative criticism, justifies it. This is a sense of “reason” that will, by definition, be true of some actions but not of others. On the

other hand there is a sense of “a reason” in which it is simply a feature of any full description *of* an action, so long as the act is minimally intentional—so long as it is, one might say, an act at all.

At one point Scanlon writes: “like [Gibbard and Blackburn] I am claiming that normative judgments are about our reactions to the natural world rather than about that world itself (specifically, in my case, about the *appropriateness* of these reactions).” (52, italics his) And he is quite right to make the point this way—if we are talking about reasons in the “strong” sense. He can, and they cannot, speak about turning the wheel as the *appropriate* reaction, and when he uses the term, but not when they do, “appropriate” can really *mean* something, can really have truth conditions apart from the unconstrained intentions of the speaker. But the idea of an action expressing an “appropriate” reaction to the world becomes truly minimal, almost simply semantic, when the bit of the world in question, the thing to which my action is the “appropriate response” is said to be the fact that *I enjoy doing this*. Now, Scanlon’s view seems simply to give us the New Age platitude, “everything happens for a reason.” Of course, this is not *quite* the platitude we might, previously, have thought—it is quite different from saying, as the expressivists must say “everything happens (simply) as a result of a cause.” But appeal to “reason” now simply explains the act in so far as it is understood to be an intentional act. We have (rightly) left “justification” in any substantive sense behind.

Although this difference between a strong and weak sense of “reason” is important, it is essentially ignored in *Being Realistic About Reasons*. And this is because of Scanlon’s view about justification. Scanlon thinks the justifications we offer for our reason stories can only be assessed in a case by case way; there are no good general principles of

reason assessment. Of course, sometimes the claim that someone has a reason to do x will be impossible to contest and other times it will be quite the opposite; Scanlon hardly denies *that*. But he thinks that there can be no general marker, no interesting antecedent way to pick out *why* justification stories divide in this way. We just have to “look and see,” as someone else might have put it. I will argue below this is not quite right, and that the degree to which the justification story relies on, or implicates, a desire based fact marks out a reason-story of an importantly distinct kind—a disturbingly distinct kind, one might say.

However, as I said earlier, what is important about this book is as much the counter account Scanlon gives of matters related to being realistic about reasons. Let me briefly turn to two of these, the ontology of reasons and explaining how reasons can motivate. I will then return to Scanlon’s account of what a reason is in more detail, taking up Scanlon’s account of its distinctive relational structure. Armed with this relational structure, we can also at last make the right sort of sense of “supervenience.” I will return to the vexing issue of reason assessment there.

ARE REASONS QUEER?

Naturalism is the *lingua franca* of the current philosophical age, and no one wishes to be accused of failing to give this Goddess the respect she deserves. One might as well try to survive the epithet “You socialist!” in the Republican primaries. But what exactly *is* it to be a naturalist, or to take naturalism seriously when it comes to ontology? When Mackie says “there are no objective values,” it would seem the claim is based on the view that all of our ontological commitments must be understood as claims about what exists in the physical world of space and time. It is this sense of “universe” he has in mind when he says that

objective values would involve entities, qualities or relations “different from anything else in the universe.” (17) And this of course is the thought that lies behind the frequently made argument that if there *were* irreducible normative truths, such things would be “incompatible with a scientific view of the world.” Scanlon writes: “This idea, that our ontological commitments should be restricted to things in the physical world of particles and planets that is described by science may strike many as a sensible naturalism. But it is an idea we should not accept.” (17)

It is not part of the scientific view that only the things we speak about when within that view can be countenanced. That is an extra bit of unjustified philosophy. Scanlon offers instead a *domain-centered* approach to ontology that runs as follows:

The way of thinking about these matters that makes the most sense is a view that does not privilege science but takes as basic a range of domains, including mathematics, science, and moral and practical reasoning. It holds that statements within all of these domains are capable of truth and falsity, and that the truth values of one domain, insofar as they do not conflict with statements of some other domain, are properly settled by the standards of the domain that they are about. (19)

Crucial here is the expression “insofar as they do not conflict.” It is one thing to make a claim that the scientific view disallows—say, that there are witches, and that they can, with spells, make people ill or cause cows to stop giving milk. *That* claim is inconsistent with the scientific world and is rightly set aside. But normative claims are simply *different* from scientific claims; they are not, simply for that reason, *inconsistent* with the scientific domain. It is

interesting that this point, to me undeniable, is never illustrated in the literature with respect to legal concepts, where the Mackie like argument would seem especially foolish. So, do we furrow our brows and wonder “if there *was* negligence, or legal guilt, such things would be of a different order than anything else in the universe”? Does anyone then propose an “error theory” of legal findings? No, the argument is absurd, a true waste of time. No one thinks that negligent talk is incompatible with scientific talk. It is simply a different domain, and within that domain we make no claims about the things that science takes up.

Scanlon sees no need to defend a general idea of “exists” of which all domains would be instances. There might well *be* such a notion, (Scanlon is agnostic about that), but unless more is said, unless such a theory is before us, this “perfectly general idea of existence” seems empty, unlike what we can say when *within* a domain (“you *do* have a reason,” “that was lightening,” and so forth). (23) Nor does a “domain centered” view mean that first order domains are entirely autonomous. Even pure statements within a domain (pure mathematical statements, abstract moral principle statements, and so forth) might entail or presuppose statements in some other domain, and when that happens, they must be reconciled. (21) And finally, neither is it profitable to give some theory of what counts as “reconciliation,” or how best to achieve it. Once upon a time, philosophers worried about how physics could be reconciled with something called free will. Now, the worry is more helpfully framed in terms of whether mental explanations are autonomous or reducible to physical ones. In the opinion of this reader, Scanlon successfully defends his robust anti foundationalism. Normative talk is assessed by the methods and convictions suitable to normative talk; there are no metaphysical grounds, no good arguments, preventing us from taking talk about reasons seriously. One

day, I truly believe, we will not even need to have this argument rehearsed, this bogeyman of queerness exorcised.

MOTIVATION ANYONE?

Well, OK, no bad metaphysics is going to stop stand-alone talk about reasons and norms. But isn't this realism about reasons necessarily incomplete? Suppose certain facts in certain circumstances *are* reasons, just as Scanlon says. How could the mere belief in such things explain action? Don't we need to posit some further active element, such as the adoption of a plan, or endorsement of a norm, for action to follow?

Well, we do need something further, obviously. Propositions themselves, whatever their content, cannot, of course, bring some act about. But what is needed is not what the expressivist would propose. The expressivist, remember, tries to capture what it is for some consideration to *be* a reason in an account of what it is for someone to *treat* some consideration as a reason. (57) When you think about it, it is almost obvious that this can never work. How can there be any possibility of explaining why some posture or other is justified if we say "being a reason" just *is* this (or any other) posture? Realism regarding reasons is the only way forward. And to the perennial question: but how can such reasons ("on their own" one might say) bring an action about?—the answer is, well, they don't. We explain an agent's action by reference to awareness of such a reason by drawing on the right idea of a *rational agent*. A rational agent

...is, first, one that is capable of thinking about the reasons for certain actions or attitudes, and for reaching conclusions about which of these are good reasons. Second, a being is a rational agent only if

the judgments that it makes about reasons make a difference to the actions and attitudes that it proceeds to have. A perfectly rational agent would always have attitudes and perform the actions that are appropriate according to the judgments about reasons that he or she accepts... More exactly, if a rational agent believes that *p* is a conclusive reason to do *a*, she generally will do *a*, and do it *for this reason*... When a rational agent does something that he or she judges him or herself to have reason to do, this judgment makes sense of the action in normative terms and explains it, because the action is what one would expect of a rational agent who accepted that judgment. Presumably there is also a causal explanation to this connection, and of the more general uniformities that I have referred to... But this causal explanation is another story, for the neuroscientists to fill in. (54-55)

I expect that some readers will find Scanlon too quick, or too cute; simply (it will be said) positing the kind of thing he needs and then defining it in such a way to make the account go through. But I am sympathetic. Scanlon here, on my view, simply generalizes from what we would say about particular people acting on particular reasons. Remember: “rational agent” here means something like “acts on the reasons one has.” It does *not* mean, as it means in economic texts or comic books, that remarkable figure who only has impeccable reasons to begin with. When Ronnie goes to the party because it is fact that he enjoys dancing, for Scanlon, this is just what rational agents do—they act, when things don’t break down, on whatever reasons they have. If it is a fact that I am interested in Roman sculpture and I find out that there is an exhibit of Roman sculpture nearby, I will then conclude I have a reason to go; if I do go, I go for that reason. Scanlon’s

appeal to the idea of a “rational agent” is nothing more than a general way of putting this point. We are, in so far as we are rational, responsive to the reasons we have. Some reasons may be tied to our particular interests. Some may be tied to our circumstances. Some may be tied simply to being a person. But there is no mystery in explaining someone’s act by reference to a reason that they actually *have*. So why not speak of a rational agent as just what we are in so far as we do this, generally—note and typically act on the reasons we actually have?

The idea of rational agent as Scanlon is employing it is I think actually fairly anodyne. After all, to have a nature, or a personality, is to have, in certain facts, reasons. (Because I am interested in Roman art, this fact, that it is here in this gallery, is a reason, for me.) To be a “rational agent” is just to add to that point the possibility of noting all the other reasons you have in virtue of just being a person say, or just being in these circumstances. It is not circular, or empty, or terribly far from ordinary agents and ordinary ability. And with this notion we can explain how we can be realists about reasons and make sense of action by those who believe they have such reasons.

PURE NORMATIVES, MIXED NORMATIVES AND SUPERVENIENCE

Even Plato believed in supervenience. Surely it is particular things in the everyday world that bear normative ascriptions. There are good people, just laws, selfish rulers, foolish acts. And, as many have also noticed, the normative attribution will hardly persist across changes in the non-normative one (the phenomenon of “co-variance”). If you cease to cause your neighbor pain, perhaps your action is no longer morally objectionable either. If facts (at least some facts) about the act change, the moral assessment will

change too. How are we to understand these things, the supervenience of the normative upon the non-normative and the co-variance of the normative with the non-normative? And if the world of non-normative facts cannot be said to “entail” or generate normative claims or reasons on their own (the famous gap between is and ought), how is it that we move so smoothly, so effortlessly, so frequently, from non-normative claims to normative ones all the time? Scanlon thinks he knows, and offers a genuinely original framework that explains it all for you.

The right way into this problem is via the relational nature of a reason. When we speak of “a reason,” in everyday discourse, we are typically pointing to some consideration or other, some fact or other, actual or anticipated, that explains some act. (His reason for going into his father’s business is to make money next year. His reason for not going to the talk today is his dislike of the speaker.) But this use, perfectly legitimate to be sure, is but a part of the story. A reason is a reason *for someone*, who in turn is in particular set of *circumstances*. A full description requires we make clear the *relational* quality of reasons. Scanlon writes:

Whether a certain fact is a reason, and what it is a reason for, depends on an agent’s circumstances. The fact that this piece of metal is sharp is a reason for me not to press my hand against it, but under different circumstances, it might be a reason *to* press my hand against it, and under still different circumstances, a reason to do something else, such as to put it into the picnic basket if I will later have reason to want to cut cheese. This suggests that “is a reason for” is a four-place relation, $R(p, x, c, a)$, holding between a fact p , an agent x , a set of conditions c and an action or attitude a . This is the

relation that holds just in case p is a reason for a person x in situation c to do or hold a . (31)

Several things must be added. First, these variables are often interrelated. The “circumstances” in which something is said to be a reason may involve reference to the agent, and it may be more or less easy to specify the agent apart from such reference. So, it may be that it is because I hold a certain institutional office that this fact is a reason for me to act a certain way (say, to vote against this proposal). (32) This is the easy case. More slippery is the reappearance of the earlier point but now in this framework: for example, if we were to say it is part of my present circumstances that I would enjoy smoking marijuana right now. In this second case, “the circumstances” and “the agent” are now hard to separate. This is not exactly, or not yet, a criticism; it is simply a feature of the relational framework before us. And finally, Scanlon is very anxious to draw our attention to the “factive character” of most statements about reasons. “ P is not a reason for someone in c to do a unless p obtains, and the person in question is actually in circumstances c .” (32)

An interesting puzzle arises from this last, at first, seemingly innocuous claim. If p does not obtain, then the normative claim about reason R, “ $R(p, x, c, a)$,” cannot obtain either. And does this not seem to generate a normative claim from a non-normative one after all, a value from a fact? (36) One could block this anomalous outcome by stipulating that perhaps only “positive” normative claims fail to follow from any non-normative ones, but Scanlon understandably feels this is beside the point. The deeper, more interesting truth about normativity lies just ahead. While p is not reason for anyone unless p is the case, obviously, there is an equally important counterpart point: we can spell out normative *relations* between certain facts

and certain reasons *quite apart from* whether the facts we refer to happen to be the case or not. Scanlon writes:

This move [stipulating that “the absence of R” will not count as a counterexample to the “no value from the facts” thesis] might avoid the problem, but it also ignores an important point about the relation R, which is that the essentially normative content of a statement that $R(p, x, c, a)$ is independent of whether p [actually] holds. This normative content lies in the claim that, whether p obtains or not, *should* p hold, then it is a reason someone in c to do a . So I will take what I call a *pure normative claim* to be a claim that $R(p, x, c, a)$ holds ... understood in this way. (36-37)

And thus an extremely fertile framework is born. “Many of the claims we commonly think of as normative are not pure normative claims, but *mixed normative claims*.” (37) A mixed normative claim “involves” a pure normative claim, but also makes, or presupposes, certain claims about how things just happen to be. When the two are combined, a claim about reasons will follow. Let us illustrate this with respect to what is sometimes called a “thick” ethical concept, say “cruel” (Scanlon’s example). To claim “Caligula was cruel” is to make a claim about what *he saw* as a reason (what he responded to and was indifferent to)—this is presumably a fact about Caligula—and to make the normative claim that he should not been indifferent to these considerations. Typically, there are further (pure) normatives in the background as well: the claim that cruelty is something one has reason to avoid in oneself and condemn in others, that one has good reason to react differently to someone who is cruel than to someone who is not, to avoid their company, not to trust them in certain contexts, and so forth. The claim “Caligula is cruel”

conjoins a claim about what reasons people should and should not act on, with a factual claim about Caligula. Such “pure normative” claims about reasons give these thick ethical concepts their point, and will guide their empirical application. But the point holds even when we turn to very general normative notions, like “wrong” or “right.” To claim an action type is morally wrong is “to claim that it has [factual] properties that provide reasons to reject any principle that would permit it” (37). “Even the claim ‘she has good reason not to do it because it would hurt her sister’s feelings’ is a mixed claim, since it cannot be true unless the action in question would in fact hurt her sister’s feelings.” (38)

And armed with this distinction between pure and mixed normative claims, we can now, perhaps for the first time, make sense of how we do in fact move from facts to values all the time. The standard approach to this problem is to start with some conception of “the facts” and then wonder “how in Heaven’s name could we get from *this* sort of stuff to any claims about what *ought* to be the case, or to what is “good”? (This is Hume; this is Ayer; this is Mackie’s “queerness” argument.) But this is very much the wrong way to conceive of the matter. Start with the normative claims, the *pure* normative claims, claims about what sorts of considerations, as a matter of kind, support the normative judgments we think right. While Scanlon himself thinks that in the end, normative claims are best thought of as claims about *reasons*, commitment to this thesis is not at all necessary for the point being made here. We could, if we like, think of “*x* is good” in a way that made no reference to “reasons” at all; the point still holds.

If the relation, R, and other reason relations, are not the fundamental normative notions in this sense [are not the relation from which all others

can be derived - SR] then there can be pure normative claims of other kinds, which may or may not be analyzable in terms of reasons. For example, instead of focusing on the one place “*x* is good” and the corresponding one place property, consider the relation “having the property *p* contributes to a thing *x*’s being good” or “having property *p* contributes to a thing *x*’s being a good *y*.” Using these relations we can formulate pure normative claims about goodness, which like the pure normative claims I have been discussing that involve [reasons], are normatively necessary and have the function of assigning normative significance to non-normative properties...The important point is not about the fundamentality of reasons but about the central role of pure normative claims, whatever normative concepts they involve. (42)

The point, and it is a very provocative one, is two-fold. First, “the normative” includes pure normative claims and mixed ones. The pure normatives are non-empirical relational claims from the start, specifying what facts, as types, generate what kinds of reasons for persons in which sorts of circumstances. “A man driving and could with a turn of the wheel avoid a pedestrian has a reason to turn the wheel”—*that* is a pure normative. Second, such claims then will “license inferences,” should they be conjoined with claims about what is the case, to claims about what one should do, or has a reason to do. *That* is how we move from facts to values or from facts to normative claims about what one should do. This framework also explains “supervenience”—I put the term in scare quotes now because we see, under this framework, that reasons, or normative claims, arise *relationally*, not “causally.” The “value” does not really “supervene on” “the fact.” The fact

is but one variable within a four part relational story, which in turn constitutes a claim about reasons.

However, the reader may wonder just how much we achieve here, unless we can go on and say something about the degree to which we can think of these claims about reasons as objective. After all, one might say early expressivists like R.M. Hare could accommodate the skeletal *form* of this point—without the sophistication of Scanlon’s particular framework to be sure, but able to offer a parallel account of (so called) “supervenience” and the move from facts to reasons all the same. Consider: we affirm, on Hare’s view, some action guiding, fundamentally non-cognitive principle (we assume it passes the prescriptivity requirement). And in light of this principle, plus some rudimentary recognition skills, we can see what facts provide a reason for action. My principle, in Hare like form, is “all acts of giving money to the needy are good.” I look around and see that, oh, what do you know? Here, before me, is a case where someone is needy, and voila! I have a reason, and away I give. The world of value, or reasons, “supervenes on” the world of facts in pretty much the same way as it does in Scanlon’s account, and the move from facts in the world to reasons for action is explained in pretty much the same way too. What is the difference?

The difference, of course, is that Scanlon thinks there *really are* reasons. Reasons are not some artifact of mere will, and an unconstrained will at that, as they are in Hare, ceasing to obtain as soon as our will might alter. For in that case, under that analysis, there are no reasons at all (it has been argued); certainly nothing of the kind that can do the sort of real justificatory work we think we are doing when we explain why, for example, we turned the wheel, damaging the fender, to avoid that cat. That is a pretty big difference, to be sure. But now we must probe a bit more into the

status of reasons in different sorts of cases, and the status of the various kinds of arguments that allegedly establish their existence.

I will approach the point I want to make about arguments for reasons via some remarks by Scanlon I find peculiar, perhaps even suspicious. In the passage above, Scanlon says that the pure normative claims that license inferences are “normatively necessary.” Whatever might this mean? Scanlon says very little in elaboration, but earlier, he writes:

The truth of pure normative claims, by contrast [by contrast with mixed normative claims, which are true, when they are, just in case certain non-normative facts are also true] does not depend on, nor co-vary with, non-normative facts. Nor do pure normative facts vary ‘on their own’. Given that they do not, the mixed normative facts that depend on them supervene on non-normative facts. This again is a normative matter, a case of normative necessity. This seems evident from reflection on what pure normative truths are. But it does not seem to me, on reflection, to be something that we should find puzzling. Given that pure normative facts are not contingent in the most obvious way—that is dependent on contingent facts about the natural world—why should we expect them to be contingent in some further sense? (41)

Pure normative facts, or claims, are “normatively necessary,” and “not contingent in the most obvious way.” Just how are we to understand this? It is a puzzling thing to say. On one hand, I think Scanlon is simply alerting us to a kind of contrast. If we say a reason arises because there is a normative connection between some fact type and some

person in some circumstances (all specified now in terms of type, so we preserve the “purity” of the normative), this cannot be understood as an empirical or causal claim. And this seems innocuous enough. But to call such claims “necessary,” or to call the *relation between* the various variables (understood as types) and a reason one of “necessity” is not only misleading, it is I think disallowed by Scanlon’s own commitment to domain independence. (Scanlon has more or less conceded this point to me in conversation.) When we have the sort of semantic relations we have in language, or the operational relations we have in logic, or the causal laws we have in the empirical world, we can make sense of how it is that certain claims, or things, are, and are not, “necessary.” But in the normative domain, there is no clear place for that sort of claim. The *relation between* a fact, a set of circumstances, a person and a reason is not like any of these—it is not semantic, logical, or causal (obviously). And so to call this relation “necessary” is to attempt to import a kind of solemnity or fixity that the domain cannot bear (and should not bear); it is to import the methods and concepts that are appropriate in other domains into a domain where they are not appropriate, where they cannot help but generate a kind of out of focus result. What *is* this relation between a fact, a person, a set of circumstances, and the reason that it generates? I cannot say. And I don’t think Scanlon can say either. It is not empirical or contingent; Scanlon certainly has *that* right. But we simply engage in mystification if we then call it “necessary.”

Could normative claims be necessary, in another, more straightforward sense? Could the *content* of a normative claim be necessary in that we could not imagine the claim not holding? That is, could some normative claims be such that we could not imagine a possible world in which they would not hold, in which the asserted content would not be

true? Sure; some facts, persons and reasons are so tightly woven together, or woven together at a level of description so intimately tied to how we think of what it is to be a person, that it is hard to imagine a possible world in which it could be otherwise. Consider pain. There might be all sorts of facts about a person's circumstances as a result of which he has reason to *overlook* that *p* is a source of pain, but that pain is *a reason*—this cannot be imagined otherwise, unless we imagine something very different from what a person is to begin with. Perhaps something similar can be said for the well-being of our children. It is hard to imagine, given what we know about how we have been shaped, creatures like ourselves that just did not care very much about their offspring. The point we get via *modus tolens* seems undeniable: if there were creatures that typically did not care about the well-being of their offspring, they would not be persons, not be like us at all. Here we can say (maybe): in no possible world at all like the one we know could things like this be otherwise for persons, could the content of the reason-claims that such facts supported not be true.

But I do not think there are many cases like this. We can often, easily, imagine possible worlds very much like our own in which some pure normative, some true claim about some fact giving some person a reason, would have failed to arise. It is not as if Scanlon's framework fails to account for this thought—the framework specifies “circumstances” and “facts” giving rise to reasons, and *these* things are usually pretty contingent; they will surely come and go with the arbitrariness of fortune. But something interesting follows from pressing this point, particularly in those cases—here it is again, of course—where “the fact” that occupies the *p* position in $R(p, x, c, a)$ is just the fact that the agent would enjoy doing *a*. Or the fact is the fact that the agent thinks of the act as a V-type act, where V names

some idiosyncratic value the agent happens to hold dear. Sometimes these desires or claims about worth disappear, or arise, because of the contingencies of psychology. Sometimes they disappear, or arise, because of the contingencies of history. I will say more about each of these below. But the result is, in either case is, they are not “necessary” normative claims in any substantive sense. And this turns out to be very important for how we understand their justificatory power. Let us leave this endlessly enchanting world of subscripts and variables and take up an actual case or two.

So consider our good friend Gaugin, once a rather frequent visitor to philosophy journals discussing reasons and their objectivity. Gaugin has a reason to leave his family and go to the South Seas, pursuing artistic development and sexual satisfaction because...well, I guess because he is constituted in such a way as to want these things, and to want them more than staying in France and painting there. The fact in the $R(p, x, c, a)$ relation claim, the fact that is “subjunctivized away” (Scanlon’s expression) and represented simply as a possible fact (or fact type) when we turn to the pure normative is just the fact that a person like this happens to want these sorts of things. If you like, you can add “very much.” OK, fine. But in our enlightened world, we don’t treat these facts as so immovable. Contingent they are indeed, and should Gaugin take a Zoloft or two, something all his friends are urging, he soon comes to treat these desires as a bit silly, perhaps appropriate for a teenager on Facebook, hardly so consuming after all. Now of course, if by “Gaugin” we *mean* “Gaugin exactly as he is right now,” with his brain just like this, and without any Zoloft coming into the mix, then of course, our initial pure normative not only “remains,” it remains “necessary”—for this *version* of “Gaugin” one might say—and all has

been saved. Of course, we now have a sense of “necessary” which will be equally applicable before the empirical world, but never mind. More embarrassing is the status of this other creature, Gaugin(2), the imagined future self who does take the Zoloft. He of course would have other pure normatives “necessarily” true of *him* (since his desires, and so the facts, and his circumstances, differ); what do we say about that? I will leave the difficulties of multiplying pure normatives for every alteration in a person’s brain chemistry and desires, and so the difficulty of adjudicating between such normatives, for the person who might, or could, be either, for another day. I take it no one really wants to go down that road. And needless to say, such talk would be an embarrassment for Scanlon, who rightly prides himself on being more faithful to everyday talk than philosophers usually are. We don’t in fact employ a conception of personal identity that swerves with every change in one’s present desires. In our everyday discourse we usually assume we have “the same person” through a few drinks, a mad crush on the bartender or waitress, or a mild course of anxiety reducing drugs. And so: how can whatever “pure normatives” that are merely true of some particular, ephemeral time slice of some self, be termed “necessary”? More to the real point at hand: what sort of *authority* can a normative claim that is contingent in *this* way actually have?

This point can be made historically too. I take it as uncontentious that certain ideas, or conceptions, of self-expression, arise at certain points of history. It is very hard to imagine the Gaugin story in the late Middle Ages, say. Of course, there were very ambitious and vain people then to be sure; Shakespeare’s plays abound with them. But the particular idea of leading a self-expressive life that is featured in the Gaugin story, where that means, not exacting revenge on your half-brother for stealing your

kingdom, but just painting somewhere else and getting the chance to chase a certain kind of girl—no, this is not around from the beginning of time. Such facts are *not* “reasons” until a certain point in the history of culture. The pure normative that would pick out such facts as reasons could not even be imagined prior to a certain point in history. But to be fair to Scanlon, all this might mean is that the pure normative in question here would have to be appropriately historically subscripted—for someone at this time, at this point in Western history, with these desires, this self-conception, and these interests, so and so would be a reason. And sure, we can *say* that. Appropriately qualified and subscripted, I suppose it remains a “pure” normative. (And every madcap contingent accident can be expressed as flowing from a tense-less causal law—if we have the right contingent subscripts *in* the law’s specification too). But what do we gain by this glamorizing terminology? To repeat the earlier point, how much justificatory work can a pure normative like *this* ever do?

More needs to be said about the desire, or about the nature of the desire, that does so much work in these cases. Sometimes the desire that underwrites the fact someone would enjoy doing *a* (and so makes it the case that the person has a *reason* to do *a*) might be fairly brute, perhaps, even if you like, non-cognitive. Perhaps that is how it is how in the Gaugin story. He just *wants* this, period, in the sort of way Hume would recognize and applaud. But sometimes the desire comes wrapped up the clothing of additional endorsement. The (in my view, exceptionally talented) writer William Vollmann regularly patronizes prostitutes and takes drugs. He does this because he enjoys it, sure, but he also makes clear in his writings that he believes that such activity commendably expresses the values of freedom and skepticism towards bourgeois pieties that he thinks right. He would continue, he thinks, to have a

reason to do these things even should he begin to enjoy them less. Looking at Vollmann, Scanlon (and others) might feel his valorization of these activities, characterizing them under this description, is silly, teenage like, something appropriate for a posting on Facebook...sure. But does Vollmann *have a reason* because these activities bear these properties *for him*—or not? Is there a pure normative that is true simply because Vollmann happens to think and feel this way *about* these things? If we say “yes” (and it is fine with me if we do) then what have we gained, what has actually changed under this framework from what we would have had under easy going non-cognitivism about the normative? What is achieved, really, in characterizing this desire as supporting a particular kind of “fact,” “the fact of enjoyment,” when the nature of the enjoyment, the possibility of enjoyment, is predicated on the act bearing a description that it bears only because the agent says so, or feels a certain way?

For me, what these examples, and the difficulties they raise, show, is not that objectivity is impossible here, but rather that it is very hard to say very much that is helpful about “the normative” overall. Scanlon wants to give an account of reasons, as such, everywhere and anywhere that they might arise. He probably has about as much that is impressive to say about such matters as there is to be said. But when we turn to the *objectivity* of reasons, I think there is a deep schism in the subject that is best faced, not blurred over. Now of course, the term “objectivity” here is has several senses. In one sense, reasons are “objective” simply in being ineliminable and non-reducible, in the “autonomy” of reason-type explanations before intentional action. But there is another sense of objectivity, or worry about objectivity with respect to reasons, when we wonder about their *authority*, and it is in this sense that there is, I think, a division that is best acknowledged. When we talk about

reasons that are rooted in certain considerations made familiar from moral life, such reasons have authority for anyone. Anyone, regardless of what they happen to want, has a reason to turn that wheel or wade into that shallow pond. But only Gaugin has this reason, only Bill Vollmann has that one. And appeals to these reasons, in these cases, are of very uncertain justificatory authority for others. The *framework* of justification is the same across the turning of the wheel case and Vollmann's use of drugs and prostitutes. It is the same $R(p, x, c, a)$. And it is a genuine philosophical accomplishment to put this framework forward, for whatever we think of the claim being made by its use in a particular case, it presents the relation between the normative and the non-normative in the most helpful light I know. But I think justification cannot approach the solipsistic either and still be a justification in any but the thinnest sense. Now in fact, in the Vollmann and Gaugin cases, the content appealed to is not, in the end, that hard to understand with a little sympathy; it is not, after all, wholly idiosyncratic. But we can move by degrees to cases where the content *would* be truly hard to understand, by anyone; where what it is that one enjoys is truly idiosyncratic, or what it is that one claims bears a certain normative property is truly foolish.

I think we must acknowledge that, when our reasons are rooted in facts about others and their welfare, our reasons have a certain depth of justificatory authority. When they mirror desires, (when the fact that occupies the p place in $R(p, x, c, a)$ is the fact of personal enjoyment, or the fact that such acts bear a certain description *for the agent*), the transpersonal justificatory authority may approach zero. Of course, it is not only reasons rooted in the welfare of others that can aspire to this sort of authority. As Thomas Nagel argued forty-five years ago, if my near future self will soon be at the South Pole, my reason to buy a good parka now

has about as much transpersonal justificatory authority as one could wish. What is crucial in these cases is this: here, and in the case of avoiding the hapless pedestrian, the facts that give rise to reasons can be easily made sense of apart from the contingencies of one's present whims or desires. Or, perhaps what is the very same point, we can make sense of "the agent's circumstances" without talking very much about what little desires happen to be floating around at that moment in that agent's head. But in the other cases, the relevant "circumstances," and so the reasons, may just *be* such contingent present desires or whims (tricked out a bit differently to be sure, such as "the fact that" certain things would be enjoyed, or "the fact that" certain actions are endorsed by the agent under a certain description). And then I think the pure normative that expresses this claim, the $R(p, x, c, a)$ we can generate in this case, may have no authority at all. "Justification" in this sort of case has become essentially identical to mere "explanation," ("this is how I feel," "this is what I want"), and so cannot be "necessary" in any substantive sense either.

Sometimes a reason's authority is deeply bound up with indifference to desires. This point goes back to Kant, who makes it powerfully. I don't care what you want, what your hypothetical imperative is, we can imagine Kant saying, you ought not to make a false promise for personal gain (for example). The reason (for Kant, this can only be a moral reason) has "desire-indifferent" authority. By contrast, sometimes all that a reason is, and its whole justificatory authority, just *is* being a desire, or, if we are to use the alternative language provided by Scanlon's framework, the contingent fact of contingent enjoyment. This point goes back to Hume of course, and to Mill, who relies on it heavily, and credibly, in *his* political theory. Scanlon seeks an analysis of "the normative" or, of "reason," that abstracts away from this difference. And so

for Scanlon, there is no difference *in kind* in the justification stories we tell about reasons, no interesting division in the genus worth pursuing. There are of course differences in justification, some are stronger or weaker than others, but this is merely a difference in how good we happen to find particular justifications in particular cases—much as it would be in art criticism. Some critical assessments are very well founded, others much less so. One would not think there was any difference in *art types* that supported such a fact. But I think this holistic view of reasons, or of “the normative,” is a mistake, and it limits the reach of Scanlon’s argument. If we try to say something about reasons everywhere, it turns out that we must say a bit less. And I think the differences between Scanlon and the expressivist essentially disappear when we turn to those reasons whose justification stories must point, essentially, to “the fact that” the agent enjoys the act, or pursues it under a deeply personal description. Of course, the expressivist has the wrong ontology of reasons from the start as it were, and so he can never make sense of justification, not really—and not anywhere. Scanlon can, but sometimes there is no justification really to be had, something the expressivist is closer to from the start.

That said, Scanlon has offered a very fertile account what a reason is, when “reason” is understood in this most general, overarching way. And he has also given us a first class counter argument to that of the expressivist at every turn. If any reader of this review happens to have even the slightest interest in the nature of justification, or simply has the brute desire to find out more about this subject, then, it really is fact that such a reader has a very good reason to read this book.